

Working Mothers and Coping Strategies: A Study of Working Women in Port Harcourt City

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ABSTRACT

Women's entrance into the labour market over time has been a steady state graduation. New policies and global movement for women's right to a large extent has enhanced this situation as the gender gap between male and female labour force participation has narrowed over time. Recently, there has been an influx of married working women with children into the employment space. These women are qualified as "working mothers". The entrance of this group of people into the labour market is however confronted with a number of challenges that undermines work efficiency on the one hand and family on the other. The paper is therefore an examination of the coping strategies adopted by working mothers in bridging the gap between the family and work domains in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. The study is a qualitative design. The population consisted of 30 working mothers in diverse professions randomly selected from a cluster of 5 zones. The instrument for data collection was a semi-structured interview (SSI) questionnaire, and data was analysed using descriptive statistics, such as percentage and frequencies. The results of the study shows that Day Care/Crèche services, Housemaids, as well as relatives/siblings are the most effective coping strategies adopted by working mothers in Port Harcourt Metropolis for mitigating work-family conflicts. It shows further that social dynamics in Africa and Nigeria in particular has given rise to a more payment-related approach to striking a balance between work and family compared to previous times when family/siblings was a rather more preferable approach. It is recommended here that organizational policies should pay more attention on providing supportive services such as day-care facility to assist working mothers to manage their multiple social roles. Organizations can evolve flexi-time for working mothers and even approach work for them on a part-time basis.

Keywords: coping strategy, working mothers, working married women, role-conflict, decision gates, labour market participation.

INTRODUCTION

The labour market in the global information age has experienced serious evolution as it has been inundated with women. New policies and global movement for women's right to a large extent has enhanced this situation as the gender gap between male and female labour force participation has narrowed over time. Globally, from 1980 to date female labour force participation has risen by over 2 points increase in the aggregate labor force participation rate for women (OECD, 2014; Fullerton, 1999). More recently, there has been an unprecedented influx of married women with children into the labour market. These women are however classified as "working mothers". Working mothers as used here connotes those women who are married with children and are employed or work outside their respective homes for income; in addition to the domestic work they fulfill at home in nurturing and tendering their children.

Substantially, the rise of feminism, feminist struggle and international declarations supposedly brought about the liberation of women from oppressive patriarchy and ushered them into this new arena (Agnaou, 2004). The United Nations declared 1975 to 1985 a decade for women and in 1996 world conferences were held in Belgium and China, specifically designed to address women empowerment. These international supports reasonably led to a shift or perhaps improvement in the participation of women in the labour market. Studies have shown that by early 2000 more mothers were in employment in the United States of America vis-à-vis the 1970's (Kestenbaum, 2004). Yusuf (1998) equally stressed that female labour force participation in Nigeria has gradually been on the increase. Comparably, women employment in Nigeria is undermined by certain socio-cultural factors which restrict their labour market participation.

In the past, work and family life were largely regarded as "isolated domains". But as women joined the labour force in incremental magnitude of about 36.5% (World Bank, 2002), a distortion in gender boundaries emerged, "work and family" materialized as a distinct field of study and the image of work-family conflict gradually but unavoidably supplanted long-held assumptions about "isolated domains" for both women and men.

Married working women encounter various encumbrances in performing differential social roles, such as the wife, mother, homemaker and employee roles. As women become employees, the major problem in this space is the conflict emanating from multiple social roles. According to Katz and Khan (1978) cited in Tasmia et al. (2013), the execution and operation of multiple roles in many ways should engender role conflict. The expectations surrounding any of these roles can generate inter-role conflict when they involve pressures to dominate the time of the individual and interfere with fulfilling the expectations associated with the other functional roles.

Balancing the demands of work and family roles has become a crucial daily task for many professional women, especially for those in occupations that require the commission of eight (8) hours on the job. Such related occupation may include; bank-related work, medical, military, police, oil and gas work, etc, and most of these jobs as it were comes with emergencies at times that would require the elongation of normal hours of duty.

Time utilization studies have shown that married women spend substantial amounts of their time performing multiple roles (Aminah and Narimah 1992; Van Der Lippe et al. 1992; Airmy et al. 1991; Hing, 1984). Also, role theory postulates that multiple roles can lead to inter-role conflict and, in turn to symptoms of strain (Katz and Khan 1978). Women in multiple role situations therefore need to reduce the amount of conflict they experience by deploying coping strategies or mechanisms that can ameliorate their efforts in various roles.

Many researchers have studied role conflict (Nkpah, 2014; Greenhaus and Powell, 2006; Aryee, 2005; Higgins and Duxbury 1992; Pleck et al. 1980), and coping behaviour (Waterhouse, 2013; Skinner and McCubbin 1991; Beutell and Greenhaus 1983), especially focusing on women in Western cultures. Apparently, with the combination of employment and mothering becoming increasingly challenging in this part of the world, this paper is therefore concerned with logically and empirically understanding the dynamic strategies adopted by women, especially married working mothers in coping with their work and family to undermine work-family related strains and crisis in Port Harcourt, Nigeria. As we progress in this work, it is important to understand that at various points we have used the phrase "working women" interchangeably with "working mothers" or "married working mothers" to mean one and the same thing. The paper is organized into nine sections. Following the preceding section is the aim/objectives of the paper where we outline the intended goal and objectives. Section three deals with the research questions and in the fourth section a conceptual clarification is made, where we briefly look at the concept of work and work-family. In the fifth section, the major predictors of work-family conflict for working women is explicated, whereas section six focuses on the literature on coping strategies adopted by working women. The seventh section of the paper outlines the methodology of the work. In section eight, the socio-demographic information of the study's sample population is clearly outlined. The paper ends in section nine where we make a conclusion of the whole matter.

AIM/OBJECTIVES

Generally, this paper is concerned with women, qualified as working mothers with children and their Coping Strategy they deploy to bridge the gap between

Work and the Family. The paper equally has the following under-listed specific objectives;

- To concisely understand the concept of work.
- To comprehend work-family within theoretical models
- To come to terms with the factors that creates imbalance in work-family for working women.
- To examine the role-conflict married working women with children face in the combination of “domestic and industrial work”.
- And to examine the dimension of mechanisms employed by working women to bridge the gap between work and family domains.

Research Questions

- What is the understanding of work in the context of this paper?
- What are the various models for comprehending work-family?
- What are the factors or predictors that create imbalance in work-family?
- Do married working women face challenges in the combination of domestic and industrial work life?
- What are the strategies married working women adopt to bridge the gap between work and family?

THE CONCEPT OF WORK

Work is just about the oldest social phenomenon in human history. Human existence is a function of work. This is so in that to exist man must eat, and to eat work must be done to generate food. Even in the days of no concomitant income, men have always worked essentially for the purpose of having food, shelter, etc. In the natural sciences, specifically physics, work is seen in the light of impact or force on an immobile object that compels it to move. In this case, work entails efforts. From a social science view point, especially Sociology and Economics, the concept of work is understood as the actions and efforts of man that enhances social survival cum existence. Though the concept of work has undergone social dynamics, yet it is still a truism that through the activity of work, food is placed on the table and newly born are fed until they grow older. Work therefore involves the exertion of efforts and the dissipation of energy for the achievement of a certain purpose that can translate to sustenance.

Early human societies equally worked as previously stated. The major activities of early simple societies were basically hunting and gathering (Sanderson, 1988). This was a form of work through which food was developed for the care and growth of children. As early as 40,000 BCE, Sanderson is of the view that hunters working in groups trailed and slayed animals which served as food for them and their

families. While men hunted, women were more naturally pre-disposed to gathering/collecting food. Women did the gathering and collecting of food because they were generally not suited to hunt owing to their delicate nature. Though women did not hunt in early rudimentary societies, the worth of their gathering perhaps was more valuable compared to that of the men. They had to gather firewood's, pluck corns, uproot potatoes, etc and cook in addition to attending to the needs of the children. In other words, women worked but it was basically "domestic work" and not "intensive labour" of hunting. In this sense, women equally exerted efforts and dissipated energy in carrying out "domestic work".

The rise of capitalism and technological advances, combined with colonization, triggered profound changes in socio-economic life. As capital grew, more industries emerged and industrial expansion paved the way for increased work. With the First World War, work began to change as men were in the battle field, women assumed the role of the men in productive settings. From here, social dynamics occurred for women in the world of work, originally a man's prerogative (Kroska, 2004). With this entrance into the labour market, women now exert efforts and dissipate energy in two fronts of work and family. The combination of these two roles however has variegated social implications for the woman worker.

Work-Family Conflict

The concept of work-family conflict is a complex and multi-directional social construct, yet requires a definition. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) cited in Somech and Drach-Zahavy (2007:1) defined the concept as;

"a form of interrole conflict in which role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect"

The family is a distinct domain from work and requires time. Certainly, just like the family; work domain equally requires time though activities in both domains vary; they inherently absorb an individual's time and energy. In other words, the two fronts are completely different in what and how energy and efforts should be dissipated, yet they are both time-bound. Kahn et al. (1964) presented work family conflict using the role theory framework. As a model, role theory points out that social roles have dissimilar expectations and challenges, as such requires the combination of time, energy and commitment to perform a particular role. Work-family conflict arises when there is a mismatch between the demands of the family and work place and such incompatibilities create inability to assuage these demands that lead towards inter-role conflict (Kinman and Jones, 2008; Kahn et al., 1964).

In earlier study, Goode (1960) had identified time constraints, energy and commitment as significant obstacles in performing various roles. Role pressures and of course incompatibility to manage multiple social roles and demands generates conflicting circumstances for working mothers to manage their household and workplace tasks (Afzal et al., 2010). Moreso, Bird (2006), Cross and Linehan (2006), Matthew and Panchanathan (2011) cited in Saher et al. (2013:32) argued that family responsibilities are generally disproportionate, this makes it rather very cumbersome for married working women with children to find it quite uneasy to manage in tandem with work fronts. These disproportionate family responsibilities according to them include but are not reducible to child care and various other domestic chores. In their analysis they seem to be saying clearly that working women are undermined with appropriate informal social support and so are eventually confronted with "roles over load"(Saher et al. 2013). Studies in this direction suggest that such "role over loads" can however eventuate in stress (Thomas and Ganster, 1995), declining psychological (Allen et al. 2000) and physical wellbeing (Frone, Russel, and Cooper, 1997) that could largely exacerbate dysfunctions in marital relationship.

Predictors of Work-Family Conflict for Working Women

Increased participation of women in labour market has however intensified their dual responsibilities and roles. Consistently, working women face difficulties to integrate their work roles and responsibilities and manage time with household chores (Grady and McCarthy, 2008). According to Nkpah et al. (2012), Noor (2004) working women are steadily confronted with two dimensions of work family conflicts: (1) work-interfering-with-family (WIF) and (2) family-interfering-with-work (FIW). The former clearly denotes that engagement at the work place does not appear to create opportunity for conducive home management, therefore the family suffers. The ensuing suffering has various impacts that goes from physical to emotional. The latter however indicates that too much attention to the home-front overwhelms efforts at the work place bringing about retrogression in work performance, queries, etc. These conflicts as stated by Streich et. Al. (2008) are further divided into three forms:

- time-based-conflict
- strain-based-conflict and
- behaviour-based conflict.

In a rather more apparent form, aligning to the stress-strain model of Dunham (1984) and social identity theory of Lobel (1991), Ahmad (2008) developed a predictive model for work-family conflict to really comprehend the main predictors of work-family conflict. She categorized work, family and personal factors that creates imbalance in work-family for working women. Fundamentally the factors that create

strains or conflicts for working women according to Ahmad can be categorized into two, viz; work-related factors and family-related factors.

Work-related factors includes,

- type of work
- work time commitment
- Job involvement
- Job flexibility life-cycle stage

Whereas, family-related factors includes,

- The number of children a woman has
- Child care pattern/arrangements
- Social role values,
- gender role orientation
- and of course, locus of control,

From the above it is clear that the factors that create family-work-life imbalance or strains for working women are basically in two dimensions (whether as posited by Ahmad 2008 or as stated by Nkpah et.al. 2012 and Noor, 2004) and the types are of course embedded in each dimension. The interplay between these two reinforces imbalances that we would certainly call "conflict" and such conflicts undermine performance at both ends.

Coping Mechanism adopted by Working Women

The underlying question for this section is, what is the meaning of coping? And what are the strategies or coping mechanisms adopted by working women to mitigate work-family conflicts? Without much ado, our goal here is to understand from available literature the different mechanisms adopted by working women from other studies. In the first instance, coping is essentially defined as the efforts used to manage the internal or external demands that are considered as potentially harmful and stressful to the individual (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). More so, coping is a process and permeates across several stages or what we would call decision gates. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) defined the stages as primary and secondary stages, which we call preliminary and post- preliminary decision gates. Primary stage is the preliminary decision gate of assessing whether an event is harmful and controllable, while Secondary stage or post-preliminary decision gate involves perception of the abilities to cope with the stressful event. These decision gates actually involve the management of the situation. They facilitate the ability to envisage the type of coping stratagem one would appropriately utilize, in the event of preventing or regulating associated demands of stress. Clearly therefore, coping strategies are

behaviours adopted by the individual in response to reduce the opposing impacts of the appraised stressor or strain. The goal is to create both an internal and external enabling environments to optimize efficiency in performing both domestic and formal tasks. Coping stratagem is however an absorption from negative spillovers between the domains of family and work. Once the individual can absorb such strains, the balance between work and family front definitely will narrow leading to optimized efficiency for work on the one hand and the family on the other.

Apparently, a combination of coping strategies exists and is however adopted by working women especially working mothers to absorb themselves from negative spillovers. Brink and De la Rey (2001) suggested similar balancing techniques, such as proactive problem solving, planning, implementation of support structures be employed. Furthermore, research by Pocock (2005) on Australian women reveals that the main mechanism deployed by women in that space in balancing work and family-life is part-time work. Although this is applicable to most developed societies, African societies especially Nigeria seldom practice part-time work for working mothers with children. As such internal and external outsourcing of domestic duties becomes more feasible in Nigeria. Essentially, as opined by Nkpah (2014) working mothers in Nigeria are naturally predisposed to adopting family members especially grandmothers and siblings as coping strategies. Recent development in urbanization has however undermined kinship relations impacting more on these women in terms of getting support. For instance, on the one hand, grandmothers are totally acclimatized to the rural setting and the easiness and comfort it brings, as such would rather prefer to stay back in the village and avoid the unassuming effects of urbanization like overcrowding, traffic during rush hours etc, while on the other hand siblings have to attend schools, graduate and gain employments. This has however rendered this mechanism or strategy rather scarce.

Regardless of all these, the study is designed to have, from qualitative empirical view point a full grasps of the approaches married working mothers actually adopt in very recent times in metropolis such as Port Harcourt. Though as stated above a combination of stratagem exists but empirical conclusions from our study locale would underscore adherence or not to previous studies as it were.

METHODS

The study is a qualitative research and explores the coping strategies adopted by married working women in striking a balance between work and family domains. Thirty (30) married working women with children were randomly sampled from a cluster of five zones. Port Harcourt city, the capital of Rivers State, Nigeria was clustered into five (5) zones; these are Ogbunabali, D/Line, Rumuola/GRA, Port Harcourt Township and Rumuibekwe zones. From each of the zones, six (6) married

working women with children were randomly selected from various sectors and professions. Data for the study was gathered by the use of a semi-structured interview questionnaire conducted to achieve a better knowledge of the subject, and the data was analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and simple percentage.

Table 1.7: Professions of respondents.

| S/N | Professions | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----|--------------------|-----------|------------|
| 1. | Bankers | 7 | 23% |
| 2. | Teachers/Lecturers | 11 | 37% |
| 3. | Oil/Gas | 4 | 13% |
| 4. | Nurses/Doctors | 8 | 27% |
| | TOTAL | 30 | 100 |

The table 1.7 above shows the categorization of professions for the sampled population of the study. As shown, majority of the respondents, 37% (11) are Teachers and Lecturers. This is followed by Nurses/Doctors, 27% (8). Respondents in the Oil and Gas profession, 13% (4) are relatively few, whereas Bankers make up 23% (7) of the entire sampled population. Women in these professions spend no less than 6 to 8 hours daily at the respective workplaces which however reemphasize the obvious challenges they face between the family and the work domains.

Socio-Demographic Data of Respondents

Table 1.8 below describes the demographic characteristics of the respondents (age, educational qualification, family type, and number of children). Data for the study shows that majority of the respondents (53%) are within the age bracket of 31 – 35. Apparently, 30% of the respondents were between the age range of 36 to 40, while 10% and another 7% are respectively within the age bracket of 26 – 30 and above 40. The family characteristics show that 77% of the entire respondents are from simple nuclear families as against 23% of the respondents who live in extended familial form. Our sampled population is an enlightened and educated one, as 43% have Bachelors or HND degrees, 37% have Masters Degrees, while 13% and 7% are respectively holders of OND and a PhD degree. As shown in the table, 40% of the

respondents have two (2) children, while 30% have only one (1) child. 23% have two (2) children whereas 7% of the sampled populations have 4 or more children.

Table 1.8: Demographic Information of respondents.

| Demographic Characteristics | Frequency | Percentage |
|----------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Age | | |
| 26 - 30 | 3 | 10% |
| 31 - 35 | 16 | 53% |
| 36 - 40 | 9 | 30% |
| 41 above | 2 | 7% |
| Educational Qualification | | |
| OND | 4 | 13% |
| BSc/HND | 13 | 43% |
| MSc/MBA/MEd. | 11 | 37% |
| PhD | 2 | 7% |
| Family Type | | |
| Nuclear | 23 | 77% |
| Extended | 7 | 23% |
| Number of Children | | |
| 1 | 9 | 30% |
| 2 | 12 | 40% |
| 3 | 7 | 23% |
| 4 or More | 2 | 7% |

1.9 Strategies Adopted by Working Mothers

Table 1.9: Strategies adopted as coping mechanism.

| S/N | Strategies | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----|------------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| 1 | Day Care/Creche | 14 | 47% |
| 2 | House Maid | 10 | 33% |
| 4 | Relatives/Siblings | 3 | 10% |
| 5 | Mothers/Grandmothers | 2 | 7% |
| 6 | Effective Planning/Time management | 1 | 3% |
| | Total | 30 | 100 |

The above Table 1.9 shows that amongst the sampled population, 47% adopt Day Care/Crèche as strategies (see Figure 1 with the longest bar). 33% are inclined to house maids, while 10% of the sampled populations are particular about relatives/siblings. The Table also indicates that whereas 7% of the study's populations make use of their mothers and grandmothers as their coping strategies, 3% are majorly inclined to effective planning/ time management. As discovered from gathered information, majority of the respondents whose strategy is day care/ crèche are mainly working mothers who are in the medical and banking profession. The study further reveals that those who opt for house maids are Teachers/Lecturers as well as women in the oil and gas sector. From our data, though not shown on the table, most of the respondents whose strategies are relatives/siblings usually have confrontational challenges with the relatives especially where they are females and have consanguine relationship to the male spouse or husband. In many cases to have a peaceful home the female relative is usually sent back home, leaving the married working woman with the challenge of coping with the two domains. Most respondents in the interview narrated how effective planning /time management does not really apply, as no amount of planning can change the situation except one adopts either other strategies. Although this strategy is consistent with what Somech and Drach-Zahavy (2007:4) called "Super at home", it however means that the married working woman with children opts to perform all the tasks at home by herself without any form of informal support.

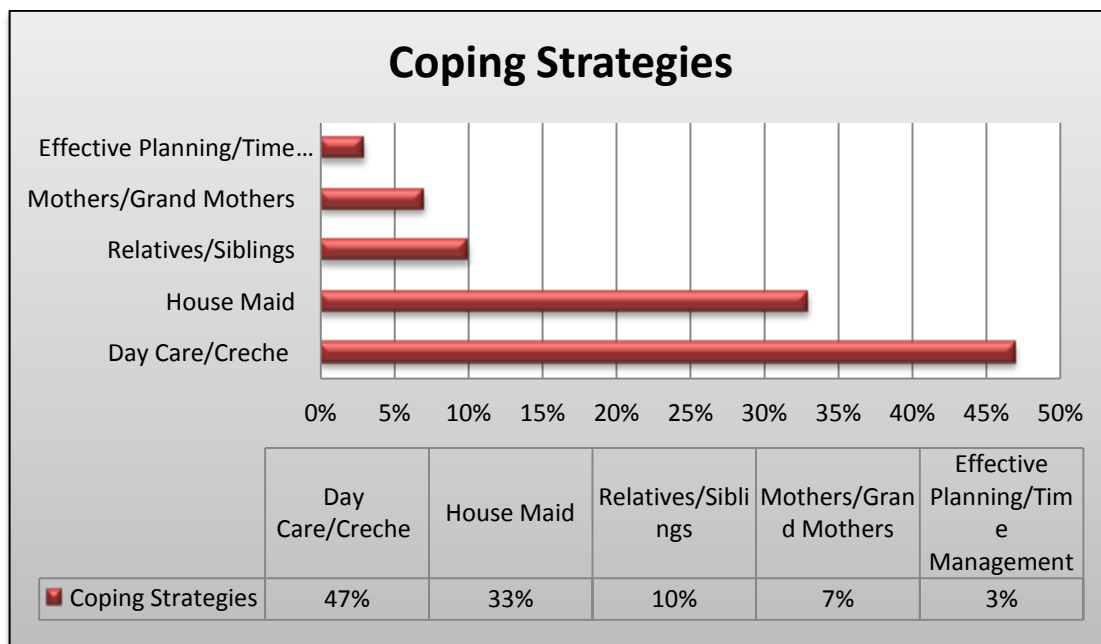


Figure 1: Graphical representation of adopted strategies.

As it were only 1 (3%) of our respondents is “super at home”. The experience of such ‘individuation’ as we would call it is hectic as the woman would look older than her age and at some point’s fall sick and such scenario would however spillover into the work domain and would undermine work efficiency. This is what Holdings (2011) cited in (Lian and Tam, 2014:42) calls “stressed out”. The study further uncovered that, working women who employ daycare or house maids are those with more than two children. The conclusion from the table is that, a reasonable percent of the respondents monthly income is spent on coping as all these strategies involve payment (for strategy 1 and 2), clothing, feeding, and provision of healthcare (for strategy 3 and 4).

CONCLUSION

The paper explored the coping strategies working mothers adopt to bridge the gap between work and family domains. Married working women are daily confronted with managing their work and family life alongside their multiple responsibilities of household tasks and work. Women have entered the labour market and this comes with associated strains that create imbalances between the two domains of family and work. Though the two domains exert untold pressure on working women, both domains remain very important to them, the need for coping mechanisms or strategies as it were. This paper has shown that across board, Day Care/Crèche services, Housemaids remain the first point of strategy adopted by working mothers relative to relatives/siblings. Though from the data, relatives/siblings is still adopted, yet; it is no longer the preferred choice as it were. It shows further that social dynamics in this part of the world has given rise to a more payment-related or monetary-based approach to striking a balance between work and family vis-à-vis in the past where relatives/siblings was a better and preferred option as Nkpah (2014) emphasized. Various social factors have actually contributed to the emergence of this new pattern of coping strategies as earlier stated. In a nut-shell, the understanding is that coping strategies in various metropolises are capital intensive and reinforces the idea that Day Care/Crèche services are basically in business for working women and not “house wives”.

Support from husbands, and the redistribution of social roles within the family to share household tasks is not a commonly accepted and practiced phenomenon in Nigeria. But in recent time, husband’s support has been identified as an important and major source in managing work-family life. According to (Tasmia et al. 2013; Amao-Kehinde and Amao-Kehinde, 2013) most married working women with children tend to keep and make their husbands very happy so that they can give support with domestic chores. Happiness to husbands of course may vary but in the most comprehensible manner may portend satisfying the male spouse’s emotional

needs and showering of gifts. In as much as the male spouse is supportive in this space, the woman would have ample opportunity to rest. This however serves as a fundamental coping strategy to undermine work-family strains.

Therefore, we recommend that Organizational policies should focus more on providing supportive services such as day-care facility to assist working mothers to manage their multiple social roles. Organizations can evolve flexi-time for working mothers and even approach work for them on a part-time basis. This is possible in this part of the world as contemporary time is all about information and communication. Women can have their laptops and Modems and still add value to the business from home, after all as Manuel Castell would say; it is a network society. Maternity leave is very important, and we recommend that it should be extended to perhaps six (6) months. Within these six months, work can continue progressively but from the home and the women in this case must still be entitled to "bonuses" as Shellenbarger, (2008) calls it. Finally we recommend that husbands should become "modernized" leaving "patriarchal ecstasies" behind and face the new reality of economic support from their wives and offer them maximum domestic support. This will go a long way to frustrate work-family stressors that generates marital discords amongst working women and their spouses. Going forward, it is worthy of note to admonish that future studies should be more robust, embracing larger sampled population with quantitative analysis and focus on the singularity of effective time management/planning as coping strategy amongst low income working mothers.

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